

Robert Frost : For Japanese Students.

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This article is not intended to be, in itself, either a study of Frost's poetry or a thesis in support of any particular idea. It is merely the enlargement of a suggestion based upon a study of the merits of Frost's work, that many of his poems make suitable material for the study of the English language for Japanese college students.

While there is an abundance of teaching material in both British and American literature, when one comes to the choice of a particular text, say for a semester, it is often difficult to find one that is just right for hardness both of form and of content; that is to say, a piece of writing that is challenging enough to make for interest and at the same time, is of a style that will be helpful to the cultivation of the ability to read fluently, speak easily and write intelligibly. I hope to show that many of Frost's poems especially those in "A Boy's Will", "North of Boston", and "Mountain Interval", their being poems notwithstanding, make excellent material in all these respects.

Stress has often been laid on the development of the ability to analyze and translate long and complex sentences. Equal emphasis has been placed on the teaching or the learning, depending on whether one is teacher or student, of long and difficult words. Since, however, long and complex sentences

containing difficult words and expressions are difficult to read, perfection in reading ability has often been sacrificed to grammatical analysis, comprehension of the meaning and translation. As time is generally lacking or the class is too large, practice in free self-expression oral and written, has seldom been adequately considered.

Undeniably, acquiring the ability to understand involved writing is not without its importance. The problem, so it seems to me, is to include somewhere along the line, material that will facilitate good reading, promote appropriate self-expression and evoke interest but require less effort for comprehension. Frost's poems provide such material because they are for the most part, written in ordinary everyday language making for ease in understanding; the rhythm is natural and conversational giving impetus to proper rhythm in reading and speaking; and the dramatic element calls forth interest while the richness of metaphor challenges the reader to serious thought.

Most people will agree that in this century there has been a pronounced tendency in both prose and poetry toward the use of natural speech. In poetry which has to contend with form, this often presents a difficulty but Frost, more than any other contemporary poet has reconciled conversational speech to the demands of traditional metrical patterns. This has been pointed out as being one of the salient characteristics of Frost's poetry by all who have commented on his work. — Louis Untermeyer, Lawrence Thompson, Tristram Coffin among others. Let us see how this factor is of special benefit to those who would learn to read and speak English fluently.

For the reason that in English, accent plays such a prominent part both in the pronunciation of separate words and in the reading of phrases and sentences, Japanese students whose native language is conspicuous for its lack of accentuation, come up against a real difficulty in the study of the English language. For not only must the accent be placed on the proper syllable or syllables in each word but in a sentence, the accented syllables of each word must be differentiated for strength if one is to achieve a natural English rhythm.

In Japanese, the general rhythm of natural speech and also of poetry seems to resemble the dactylic measure as found in such lines as the following by Byron :

“Shadows of beauty!
 Shadows of power!
 Rise to your duty—
 This is the hour.”

or in Hogg's

“Bird of the wilderness,
 Blythesome and cumberless,
 Light be thy matin o'er mountain and lea;
 Emblem of happiness,
 Best be thy dwelling-place,
 O to abide in the desert with thee.”

The main difference is that Japanese rhythm is irregular and many unaccented syllables follow the accented ones. The natural rhythm of English speech, on the other hand, is fundamentally iambic and this in pentameter is the rhythm most often used by the majority of the great poets including Shakespeare. The following few lines from “Hamlet” are as good as any for

illustration ;

"Tis now the very witching time of night,
 When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
 Contagion to this world : now could I drink hot blood,
 And do such bitter business as the day
 Would quake to look on. Soft! now to my mother".

It is this basic rhythm that makes the speech in poetry of Shakespeare's plays sound natural when spoken on the stage and this is also what makes for the conversational tone in Frost's work.

But whereas in Shakespeare and the later poets, the diction is not quite the same as in ordinary speech, in Frost, it is almost identical. Many lines can very well be taken out of their context and used in conversation. Take, for example, the following lines from "The Death of the Hired Man":

"You can be certain,
 When he begins like that, there's someone at him
 Trying to coax him off with pocket-money,—
 In haying time, when any help is scarce.
 In winter he comes back to us. I'm done."

'Sh! not so loud: he'll hear you', Mary said,

'I want him to: he'l. have to soon or late'⁽¹⁾:

or the following from "Home Burial":

"There you go sneering now!"

'I'm not, I'm not!
 You make me angry. I'll come down to you.
 God, what a woman! And it's come to this,

A man can't speak of his own child that's dead.'

You can't because you don't know how to speak.

If you had any feelings, you that dug

With your own hand—how could you?-his little grave;

I saw you from that very window there,

Making the gravel leap and leap in air,

And roll back down the mound beside the hole.

I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.

And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs.

To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.

Then you came in,'⁽²⁾ ”

However, not all poems in iambic can be read to meter and still produce the effect of natural speech. More often than not many poems tend to cause a sing-song effect as in the following quatrain by Tennyson :

“This truth came borne with bier and pall,

I felt it when I sorrowed most,

'Tis better to have loved and lost

Than never to have loved at all.”

One of Frost's greatest poems, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is written in exactly the same metrical pattern but the effect is entirely different. Here is the whole poem :

“Whose woods these are I think I know,

His house is in the village though;

He will not see me stopping here

To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer.

To stop without a farmhouse near

Between the woods and frozen lake

The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.⁽³⁾

The difference, no doubt, arises partly from the difference in diction. Expressions such as "borne with bier and pall", and "Tis better" however appropriate they may be to "In Memoriam", are poetical rather than commonplace whereas in Frost's poem, there is no word that one might not use in everyday speech. But there is something else. In Tennyson's stanza, the over-all iambic rhythm tempts the reader to accent words like "when" in the second line and "to" in the third and fourth lines which, in ordinary speech, would not be accented at all. In Frost's poem, on the other hand, there is not a word on which the accent falls that would not be accented in ordinary speech. The same care is taken in practically all of his poems so that the natural cadences of conversational speech with its atmosphere of spontaneity are re-created in the patterns of iambic meter. For this reason, the rhythm in Frost's work helps the reader to read naturally rather than artificially and so makes his poems ideal for those who are not familiar with the rhythm of English speech.

What is desired is something simple in form where form refers to diction and, loosely, style but difficult or deep enough

in content to evoke the interest of active minds always seeking truth and substance for thought. It has been seen that Frost's poems for the most part meet with the first demand, what of the second? The answer is that although Frost uses simple language and treats of commonplace material, his poems are by no means naïve or superficial and many of them have to be read twice or three times in order to appreciate the philosophical implications hidden beneath the form.

“ Abstraction is an old story with the philosophers, but”, says Frost, “it has been like a new toy in the hands of the artists of our day……The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited metre are endless. And we are back in poetry as merely one more art of having something to say, sound or unsound. Probably better if sound, because deeper and from wider experience.”⁽⁴⁾ So from “the vast chaos”⁽⁵⁾ of all he has lived through, he has chosen a wide diversity of material with complete freedom and from these, has fashioned his narrative poems, dramatic dialogues and monologues, lyrics, pastorals, and epigrams. But he has used his materials not merely for what passing interest they may in themselves possess but as metaphors having universal significance. For Frost works on the theory that “the artist must value himself as he snatches a thing from some previous order in time and space into a new order with not so much as a ligature clinging to it of the old place where it was organic.”

And it is chiefly for the reason that the simple events, casual incidents and commonplace topics are metaphors and each poem in its entirety, a symbol expressive of universal truths and ideas

that his poems hold interest for people here as well as in his own country. They make the reader aware of familiar realities that escape the eye of ordinary people and lead the mind to endless paths of philosophical reflection. This will be seen from a brief consideration of three representative poems, "Mending Wall"⁽⁶⁾, "The Death of the Hired Man"⁽⁷⁾, and "The Road Not Taken."⁽⁸⁾

"Mending Wall", a poem in blank verse, has to do with a custom formerly observed in New England villages. The earth in that region is full of stones and as the farmers raked them out they built walls between their own property and their neighbor's by piling the stones along the border. In "spring mending-time", the folks on either side would, on a certain day, walk the line and mend the gaps made during the winter. However, although the poem is created out of the stuff of such custom, it is, in reality, built upon a contradiction. The contradiction is logical, Untermeyer⁽⁹⁾ says, because the opposing statements are uttered by two types of people. Also, man cannot live without boundaries but he also resents limitations and is happy to see barriers go down. Some barriers are necessary at certain periods but as time goes on, they become useless. In this poem, it is emphasized,

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

But one of the two farmers does not, cannot, or will not understand it and universal implications dawn in the closing lines.

"I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top

In each hand, like an old stone-savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well.

He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors." The old-fashioned farmer's last word is his inherited maxim to which he clings with unreasoning stubbornness.

Frost has written several dramatic dialogues and "The Death of the Hired Man" is one of these. Contrary to what one might expect from the title, the hired man does not appear even once in the poem and yet his character is the most vividly portrayed. It is drawn deftly through the conversations between Warren, an ordinary farmer and Mary, his tender-hearted wife who argue over the return of the hired man who had left when he was most needed. Not only do the speakers live and move vividly throughout the poem but their contrasting traits of character are exploited to give the reader a living image of the hired man with all his goodness and his faults. Two other minor characters, Harold Wilson, an "arbeit" student who had teamed with Silas one summer on the farm and Silas' worldly successful brother, offer contrasts to Silas and serve to clarify certain of his traits. The student's "college assurance" brings out the pathetic irritability of the uneducated man in the face of green arrogance and the brother, his pitiful nature—half goodness and half dilettantism.

From what has been said, it would appear that the poem is nothing more than the psychological unfolding of the characters

in the story. But the very unfolding of the character of the hired man against the background of the employer who is not a cruel person but is merely absorbed in his own interest, his wife who is concerned for the welfare of the now unemployed farm-hand, the latter's brother, who is

“A somebody—director in the bank”,
and the more fortunate work-mate with his advantage of a college education—does it not give a picture of a universal situation? The thing that evokes thought is the character of the hired man. Miserable though he is, he is neither abnormal nor altogether useless. He has his accomplishment—he knows how to build a load of hay. Even Warren admits,

“Silas does that well.”

Furthermore he wants to teach Harold, even he wishing to be of some use in the world :

“He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be
Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
He hates to see a boy the fool of books.
Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different.”

And he has pride. Why doesn't he go to his rich brother? Says Mary,

“Silas is what he is—we wouldn't mind him—
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.
He never did a thing so very bad.
He don't know why he isn't quite as good

As anybody. Worthless though he is,
He won't be made ashamed to please his brother."

For these considerations, the reader is made to feel a universal tragedy in "The Death of the Hired Man."

"The Road Not Taken" relates concretely Frost's own personal experience. While traveling alone he came to a fork in the road and not being able to go in both directions chose one—the one which looked less travelled although in reality there was not much difference,

"Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same."

Nevertheless, the choice was to him very important and the reader knows that it was not for that particular day for he says,

"Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back."

As a matter of fact, Frost in his art has always travelled alone and has from the beginning chosen the road that others have not taken. In this poem, he imagines that years afterwards he would be telling himself,

"I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference",

There is a wistfully searching look down the vista of life which might be for anyone in any land.

As with these three poems, the reader is able to interpret for himself the metaphorical stories or incidents of Frost's poems

and if he is a student, enjoy the learning process. Every poem has in store a surprise for the reader. What seemed at first to be a simple tale or an incident ends in some unforeseen observation, "at once wise and sad." "The figure a poem makes."⁽¹⁰⁾ Frost says it runs from "delight to wisdom" and this is the final and perhaps the greatest factor in favoring his poems for students. Frost says, "Read it a hundred times, it will for ever keep its freshness as a metal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went."⁽¹¹⁾

The poems of Frost considered by the writer of this article to be especially appropriate for Japanese students, both for form and for content, are given in the list below. The numbers refer to the pages of "The Complete Poems of Robert Frost", Jonathan Cape, 30 Bedford Square, London, 1953:

The Pasture (21); Into My Own (25); Storm Fear (29); Wind and Window Flower (30); Mowing (37); Revelation (38); The Tuft of Flowers (41); Mending Wall (53); The Death of the Hired Man (54); The Mountain (60); A Hundred Collars (64); Home Burial (71); After Apple-Picking; (88); The Code (90); The Housekeeper (102); The Fear (110); The Road Not Taken (129); An Old Man's Winter Night; (132); A Patch of Old Snow (134); Birches (145); Pea Brush (147); Putting in the seed (148); A Time to Talk (148); The Hill Wife (151); The Bonfire (154); Paul's Wife (216); Fire and Ice (245); Nothing Gold Can Stay (248); The Runaway (248); Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening (250); For Once, Then, Something (250); Not to Keep

(256) ; The Peaceful Shepherd (278) ; West- Running Brook ; (28) ;
A Soldier (288) ; The Armful (293).

Reference

- (1) The Complete Poems of Robert Frost, Jonathan Cape, 30 Bedford Square,
London., 1953., p. 55.
- (2) Ibid., p. 74.
- (3) Ibid., p. 250.
- (4) Ibid., "The Figure a Poem Makes", p. 17.
- (5) Ibid., p. 19.
- (6) Ibid., p. 53.
- (7) Ibid., p. 54.
- (8) Ibid., p. 129.
- (9) Robert Frost : "The Road Not Taken" ; Bibliographical Preface and
Running Commentary by Louis Untermeyer, Henry Holt and Company,
New York, 1951, p. 110.
- (10) Ibid., "The Figure a Poem Makes" p.18.
- (11) Ibid., p. 20.